

Initial planning

| The action learning group | The action learning facilitator | How will the group meet? |
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| The recommended number of members is between 4 and 8 plus the facilitator. It is essential that every member is committed. | The group will also need to make a decision about whether they will have an outside facilitator or share the role within the group. | Traditionally action learning has been face to face. There is no reason why this has to be the case. Video conferencing is an ideal way of meeting. The group could consider the first and last meeting being face to face and the other meetings scheduled utilising new technologies such as Adobe Connect. The right format is the one that suits your context. |

| Where and when will the group meet? | What protocols will the group establish? | What resources are required? How will they be obtained and managed? |
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| The answer to this may be online or at a school. There is no reason to book expensive venues. The main issue is the frequency and duration of meetings. A normal project may require 6 meetings over 6 months. Meetings could last from a couple of hours to all day. In an all day meeting every member would have a chance to present. If the set chooses two hour meetings a maximum of three members could present so that members would present every second meeting. Meetings should happen at least once per term. | It is vital that the group establishes protocols before beginning the meetings. These can be refined during the process. Agreements around confidentiality are especially important. | What resources are required? Ensure that you include financial, physical and emotional resources. Emotional or personal resources are often overlooked. For example if the group is talking a really substantial target such as the use of laptops to transform pedagogy and improve learning outcomes for all students the support of school executive may be required. |

| Will the group work on a common project or on individual projects? | How will the projects be identified? Are they challenging and substantial? |
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| <p>There are four main approaches to the issue of projects:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is one project and all set members are contributing to it (e.g. one person presents the report on behalf of the group and the rest are involved in the questioning and decision making. The role of presenter is rotated for each meeting). 2. There is one project and all set members are implementing it in their own school in their own way (e.g. each person prepares and presents a report. While the project topic is the same each solution will be different because of context). 3. Each individual member has their own project (e.g. each person presents their own report on their distinctive project) 4. The group is made up of small teams and each team has a project (e.g. 3 groups of three and one person from each team presents the report) <p>The organisation of the meeting will need to reflect the project pattern that is chosen.</p> | <p>This is also a critical component of action learning. Time must be taken to identify the area of action and then to refine the target or goal. You can present your preliminary project area in your first project report. The group can then use the action learning process to help you to refine it.</p> |

Action learning group agreement

An example of an agreement.

Agreements do not have to be formal. This is only one suggestion.

Project title:

Facilitator:

Group members:

Meetings:

| Date | Time | Place/form | Notes |
|------|------|------------|-------|
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We agree to the following:

- Attend **all** meetings
- Do the work required, including the report, before each meeting
- *You can add your own conditions here.*
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*This document may also include details of issues like: how the set will be resourced.
By making all agreements and expectations explicit from the outset you remove much of the potential for conflict and misunderstandings.
The document doesn't need to be formal.
It could take the form of an email sent out after the first meeting to confirm understandings.*

Protocols for the group meeting

An example of a set of protocols that was negotiated by one group.

You could use this to begin the discussion about the protocols that you will observe. The protocols need to be specifically negotiated to suit your group.

The purpose of our time together is to help each other to learn our way forward.

Our group works best when we:

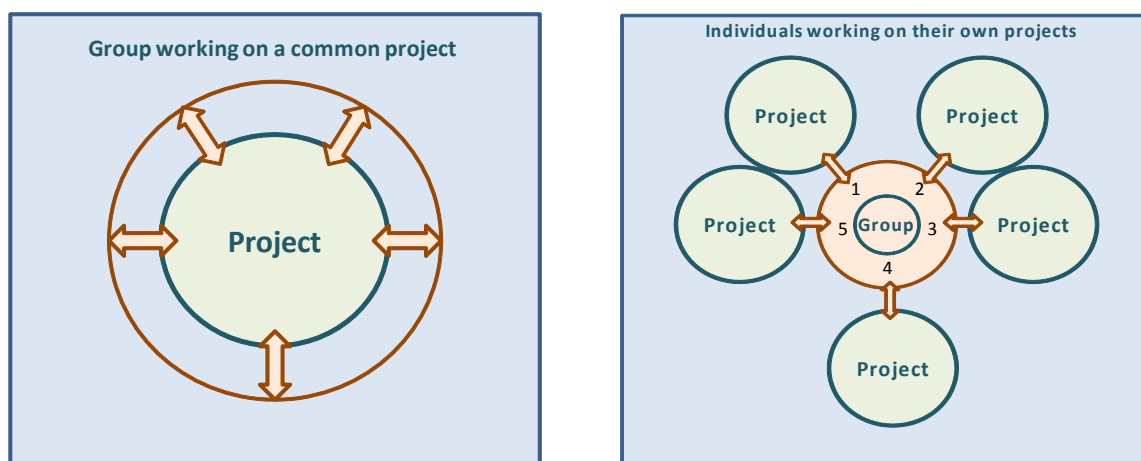
- Are committed to support the learning of each other
- Agree to commit for the duration of the project
- Make the set times a priority
- Come well prepared having worked the project as agreed
- Listen without interruption
- Ask questions that help colleagues to see situations in new ways
- Don't make judgements or criticise others
- Maintain confidentiality
- Have a passion for our work
- Enjoy learning and have fun!

Choosing an action learning project

The project is the vehicle for learning.

The project must be real life work that you have to do. Action learning helps you do your existing work more effectively; it shouldn't create more work or new work.

The group can have a common project or each individual can have their own. This project should be built around a problem that is substantial and challenging and that has no readily identifiable solution. It needs to last for at least 6 months.



Identifying suitable projects

The best projects :

- are ones that you lead so that you can influence the direction
- have a measurable outcome
- are about real work that allows for a flexible solution
- involve a problem or challenge relating to people, improving processes or an innovation
- deal with the core business of teaching and learning
- involve a significant level of challenge

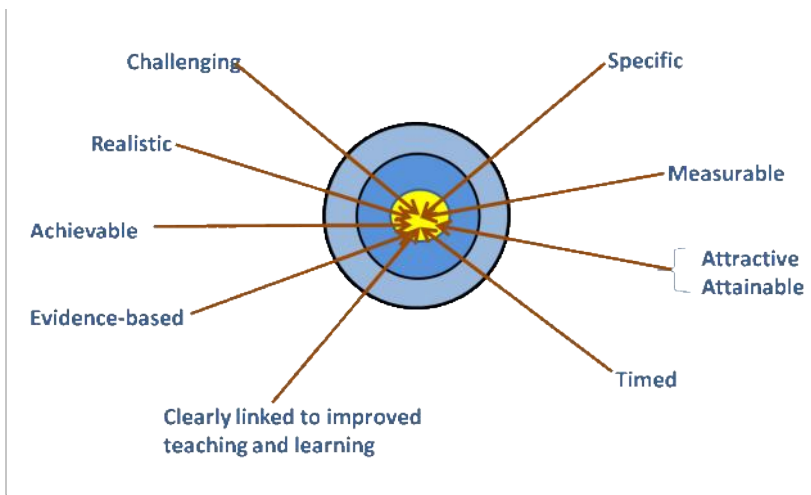
The group should take the necessary time to identify their projects before they start. It should be something significant like leading the implementation of the DER NSW or connected classroom initiative across a whole school.

Targets and outcomes

Your project should have a clearly defined target with a measurable outcome. Ideally it should be one of your school targets in the school plan. A target is a statement of the change in the level of performance that a school wants to achieve within a 12 month period.

In structuring targets careful consideration needs to be given to the strategies to be used and the measures to indicate success (indicators).

To be effective targets should be:



The achievement of these strategic targets requires time, effort and resources so they usually form the basis of effective projects.

There are very useful resources available on the EMSAD site at
https://detwww.det.nsw.edu.au/directorates/schoimpro/EMD/emd_home.htm

All about questions

The key to learning

In action learning the questions are the key to learning.

The questions should enable the presenter to:

- explore and clarify issues,
- test ideas
- refine plans
- seek feedback,
- reflect on action
- gain insight in a mutually supportive professional environment.

Learning to ask the right question is fundamental.

Learning to ask the right question is fundamental.

One experienced facilitator describes the right question as *a gift of insight* to the presenter.

A good question can change the way we see situations and ourselves and can be a permanent eye-opener.

In the initial stages the facilitator will model questioning technique and give members immediate feedback when necessary.

The best questions help colleagues to see situations in new ways.

The aim is to support their learning.

When questioning, members should:

- ▶ Ask open ended questions
- ▶ Avoid leading, prompting or making suggestions
- ▶ Avoid multi part questions
- ▶ Avoid *Why* questions
- ▶ Avoid making judgements
- ▶ Use silence to allow thinking time
- ▶ Listen without interruption until the presenter has finished answering

Members gain tremendously from being involved in the questioning.

It allows them to see new ways of approaching issues and acting and helps them to reflect on their own practice.

Some experienced practitioners find that they gain as much from observing the presenter as they do when it comes to their turn to present.

Also, questioning is a fundamental leadership skill and is the basis of all effective coaching, mentoring and professional conversations.

Sample questions

The questions below are some of the questions that have been asked in recent meetings. They are presented in no particular order.

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| <p>What is your issue?</p> <p>What is happening now? What will happen if nothing changes?</p> <p>What specifically do you want to achieve? Can you paint a picture of what this would look like?</p> <p>How would this look to a parent? How would this look to a student?</p> <p>Who would be involved?</p> <p>What would they be doing? What would they be saying? What would they be feeling?</p> <p>How would things be better if that happened?</p> <p>Who would benefit from this change?</p> <p>What problems does that cause?</p> | <p>What were the strengths that you brought to the project?</p> <p>Can you describe Mr X using only their strengths and not mentioning any negatives?</p> <p>You said that this was worthwhile? What do you mean by worthwhile?</p> <p>Would your team be surprised to learn that you felt this way?</p> <p>How is this situation different from others?</p> <p>What were the alternatives that you considered?</p> <p>What made you choose this one? What led you to discard the others?</p> <p>What should you do differently next time?</p> <p>What would it take for Mr X to be successful?</p> <p>How far would you go to achieve this?</p> <p>How committed to this are you?</p> <p>What do you need to learn?</p> |
| <p>What support would you like from the group?</p> <p>How will you measure success?</p> <p>How will you know when you are successful?</p> <p>Who are you accountable to?</p> <p>What are you accountable for?</p> <p>Whose responsibility is this?</p> <p>What will get in the way of this working?</p> <p>What could you do to ensure that this project is successful?</p> <p>Where do you want to be a month from now? A year from now?</p> <p>Can you describe a time when you were successful?</p> <p>Can you tell us more about that?</p> | <p>Have we helped you?</p> <p>Is there anything you would have liked us to have asked you?</p> <p>If you were going to do something similar what would you do differently?</p> <p>What did you learn from this experience?</p> <p>What are you avoiding?</p> <p>How do you think that you are going at this point in time?</p> <p>What didn't work?</p> <p>What factors were important?</p> <p>What do the people involved feel about this?</p> <p>What were the highs? What were the lows?</p> |

Can you articulate where you think that you will go next in this

project?

In order for this to happen who has to change most?

How will you change what you do?

You said that you were process orientated. Would you elaborate?

Who have you consulted?

Who else could you involve?

What else do you need to be successful?

Which areas would you like to explore first?

Which areas would you like to explore next?

What is the first thing that you would like to see happen?

There is no exhaustive list of questions or list of the right questions to ask. Research powerful questions and add your own questions to this list as you participate in action learning.

Action learning skills

Professional learning activity

This activity could be a useful preliminary activity aimed at building the skills necessary for professional dialogue. It can be completed in 20 minutes but is most effective if at least 1 hour is allocated.

Possible issues

- What is the most valuable learning experience that you've had?
- How do you ensure that you have balance in your life?
- What drives you as a leader?
- What metaphor would you choose to describe the last ten years of your career?

Steps

Divide into groups of three to six.

Give everyone at least 5 minutes to choose an issue to address from the list below.

Hand out information about questioning.

Nominate one person in each group to answer the question.

Rotate the roles so that every person experiences being questioned.

Roles

| | | |
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| Person One | Answer the question. Take about five to ten minutes. No one is allowed to interrupt you or comment. | We must all practice respectful listening |
| Persons two, three and four | Wait until the person has finished. Then begin asking questions. The questions should aim to help you understand what the first person was saying and help them to be reflective about their experience. They must not be judgemental or suggestive. | Continue for at least ten minutes. If you have time this could be extended to about twenty-five minutes. |
| Person five (if the group has more than 4 people. In a smaller group each questioner could give brief feedback.) | Make notes throughout. You may note values, beliefs and attitudes or you could copy down the questions that they were asked. When the questions are finished sum up what was said in about three to five minutes. | The notes should then be given to the speaker. |

Rotate the roles so that everyone has a chance to answer the question.

Reflection

